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Expression of National Identity of Pre-school Lithuanian Children in Emigration

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Abstract

The increasing numbers of Lithuanian emigrants abroad result in a problem to highlight the importance of nurturance of national identity of pre-school children living abroad and encountered challenges emphasising the problematic nature of this phenomenon. It is also necessary to identify if children's national identity is nurtured, how teaching/learning of the Lithuanian language is encouraged in the family or educational institutions as well as how links with Lithuania are maintained. The goal of the research: to reveal the expression of national identity of pre-school Lithuanian children in emigration. The methods of the research: analysis of theoretical literature sources, interview, questionnaire survey, statistical methods. The sample of the research: 54 parents and 87 children. The research revealed that the level of children's national identity is relatively high; however, the tendency to identify with the host culture is also observed. Parents deliberately chose Lithuanian education institutions in the host country, make attempts to nurture the Lithuanian language and traditions as well as to maintain close links with Lithuania.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary Lithuanian emigration is a dynamic and multidimensional process. On the other hand, this phenomenon is far from new and conditioned by various (political, socio-economic, geographic and cultural)

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factors. The phenomenon of emigration has been analysed by a big number of researchers: Aleksandravicius (2008), Butvilas (2004), Kuzmickaite (2008), Lazdauskas (2011), Malinauskas (2006), Jureviciene, Makarskaite-Petkeviciene (2011), Stankeviciene, Zurauskiene (2011), Montvilaite (2004), Kennedy, Danks, (2001), Pedersen, (2008) and others.

Historiographic and empiric studies show that emigrants have always been concerned about nurturance of their national identity and this was one of the most significant objectives among individuals living abroad (e.g., life of emigrants in displaced persons' camps in Germany in 1944-1949) (Montvilaite, 2004). The reasons for emigration of Lithuanians have been analysed in various discussions but one particularly relevant question as if disappears from the field of analysis: whether (and how) contemporary Lithuanian emigrants protect and nurture their national identity.

Taking into account this aspect, opinions and proposals of parents living abroad how to educate and develop a child in a family as well as how to find appropriate methods and forms of institutional education to enable a child to retain his or her national identity acquire a considerable importance.

In the course of years hundreds of thousands of Lithuanians have been emigrating from Lithuania and have been living scattered all over the world. Becoming diffused, a nation is getting weaker from the perspective of maintenance of its demographic, national identity, cultural and intellectual potential. According to famous philosophers and cultural researchers, emigration is almost always harmful to a nation; it presents a risk of denationalisation as well as fragments powers of the nation and weakens its cultural effectiveness (Kuzmickas, 2007). Bearers of ethnic memory disappear, every emigrant takes a particle of own culture with him or her, which is doomed to degrade in an alien environment, unless a favourable medium to revive it in emerging communities is created (Jureviciene, Makarskaite-Petkeviciene, 2011). Slightly different opinions are also heard in a political economic discourse, which make attempts to evaluate contemporary emigration in a more neutral way: emigration of educated individuals is an inevitable process; today it is hardly possible to find a nation, which lives in a compact and isolated way without emigration; the single minus of emigration is that young people get denationalised and forget the language. These issues were also discussed in the scientific conference "Contemporary Lithuanian Emigration: Losses and Successes", which was held in Kaunas in 2004.

Emigration has a significant effect not only on adults but also children, who go together with them abroad. Taking young children to live abroad, adults often comfort themselves: "They are still small and they will cope with adaptation challenges anywhere". Is everything that simple? Do the majority of children face the threat of denationalisation?

Scientific literature provides for several stages of adaptation process, which children undergo while living abroad:

Denial: attempts are made to ignore what is going around. Children frequently deny the fact that they are worried about future and pretend that nothing special is going on.

Anger: silent or very stormy reaction to people around. Parents are accused, rage is directed towards friends and children in this stage they are unwilling to communicate or to have their social life.

Perception of loss: sorrow, apathy and even depression are characteristic of this stage. Children often start living in their world of past, idealising their former friends or home and looking inwards.

Resignation (acceptance): children start searching for their new place and establish a new status in their group. Children discover advantages of their new life, and start enjoying it. They become the same as they were before going abroad.

The success of children's coping with adaptation stages to big extent depends on parents' ability to communicate with their offsprings. The younger they are, the more relevant this factor is. It is particularly important to speak about these newly experienced emotions. Otherwise a child may "get stuck" in one of the stages of adaptation. Encouragement of children's motivation, showing of newly opened opportunities and the good sides of changes acquire significant importance (Lazdauskas, 2011).

2. The research design

The goal of the research: to reveal the expression of national identity of pre-school Lithuanian children in emigration.

The methods of the research: analysis of theoretical literature sources, interview, questionnaire survey, statistical methods.

The sample and geography of research. The article presents the results of two surveys. The first one was conducted in 2010 and 31 Lithuanian parents living abroad were requested to answer 6 open questions. The method of conversation-interview, where 87 children took part, was also applied. The sample included Lithuanians living in 9 foreign countries (Estonia, Latvia, Sweden, France, Germany, Denmark, Austria, the Netherlands and the UK).

The instrument of the research, which was carried out in 2012, was a questionnaire placed on the online survey forum, which was also sent out via e-mail. The questionnaire form included 6 open questions and targeted at parents of pre-school children living abroad. The sample included 23 parents from Norway, Germany and Great Britain.

3. Results and discussion

The preservation of national individuality is prioritised in the documents of the European Union. The national identity is one of the most important factors, which brings individuals into groups, embraces the national self-awareness, the language uniting the nation, cultural traditions and national values.

The objectives of the research carried out in 2010 were as follows: to identify the national awareness of pre-school children in emigration, aspects of their identification with the Lithuanian nation and attitudes of pre-school children's parents towards nurturance of Lithuanian identity in emigration. The sample of the questionnaire survey included 31 parents living abroad and the conversation-interview was also conducted and 87 children took part in them. Children were asked: "Who is Lithuanian? How to differentiate a Lithuanian from other nationalities? What reminds them of Lithuania? Will they be Lithuanians when they grow up? Why would they like to live in Lithuania? Where would they like to live, when they grow up?" The Lithuanians from nine foreign countries took part in the survey (Estonia, Latvia, Sweden, France, Germany, Denmark, Austria, Netherlands and the United Kingdom).

All the children in the survey as well as children from the mixed families, where one of the parents is Lithuanian, stated that they are Lithuanians. Only one girl from a mixed family pointed out: *"No, I'm Irish but sometimes I'm half-Lithuanian"*. Making attempts to identify factors, which determine children's identification with the Lithuanian nation, it was established that they think this way because their parents and grandparents are Lithuanians. Interesting reasonings of children about distinguishing features of Lithuanians were observed. All the children pointed out that Lithuanians may be recognised according to language: *"Others speak differently"*, *"They speak Lithuanian with other Lithuanians"*. The children pointed out another exceptional feature: *"Lithuanian boys and girls are white"*, *"<...>of white colour"*. In opinion of the majority children *"Lithuanians live in Lithuania and it is necessary to go by plane to them"*. Two thirds of children in the survey see themselves as citizens of Lithuanian in the future. In their opinion they will remain Lithuanians because *"parents are Lithuanians"*, *"<...>I will speak Lithuanian"*, *"I want to be a Lithuanian and I love Lithuania"*. One third of children still have doubts about their future citizenship and they stated that they have to think it over. One of them mentioned that he will do the way *"<...>his mummy tells him to do"*. Making attempts to identify what connections children feel with Lithuania, if they would like to live in Lithuania, what they like or dislike in Lithuania, it was established that only half of the children would like to live in Lithuania. The children like *"to stay at grandma's"*, *"grandparents live there"* in Lithuania as well as *"<...>watchdog, may good playmate"*. The other half called their current host country their motherland: *"My mother is living in Dublin and I want to live together"*, *"Here are my home and my dog"*, *"When I grow up, I will be Spanish and I will not want to come back"*. All the children shared positive remembrances about Lithuania because – *"<...>snow and friends"*, *"<...>sky, land, swans, Palanga, rain, summer<...>"*, *"grandparents' home"* are there, *"snow is so white"*, *"decorated eggs<...>"*, *"Puntukas rock is so big, one can climb on it"*, *"There is a hill with light, my mom told me the legend"*. One of the official state symbols, i.e., the Lithuanian national flag, most frequently reminded children about Lithuania. The children mentioned that in emigration they celebrate the Lithuania's Independence Day, Easter, Christmas and All Saint's Day most frequently. One of the children

remembered the Stork's Day and Shrove Tuesday. The following is mentioned speaking about Lithuania: "*<...>potato dumplings, so big and delicious*", "*bread so tasty and brown<...>*", "*trees are green: oak, birch, fir, mushrooms<...>*", "*Maxima*" and "*TV tower*".

During the survey of parents' opinion they were asked: "What, in their opinion, enhances preservation of the Lithuanian identity? Why do they choose an educational institution with Lithuanian as a language of instruction for their children? Is the national identity sufficiently nurtured in an educational institution? How do they imagine the content of children's national education? How do they themselves encourage teaching/learning of Lithuanian in their family? How do they maintain links with Lithuania?"

The data of the parents' questionnaire survey revealed that the majority of the respondents think that the preservation of Lithuanianess is firstly enhanced by their wish to return to Lithuania someday: "*<...>we are here just to earn money*", "*I see the future of my family only in Lithuania*".

Parents of pre-school children intentionally choose institutions, where Lithuanian traditions are fostered: "*<...>I chose this institution because Lithuanianess is nurtured here. For me it is important to ensure that a child could spent at least some time in the environment, where everybody speaks his mothertongue*", "*If teachers and children, who do not speak Lithuanian, were around my child, he would feel stressed. Attending this institution, he will not forget the mothertongue, will find more Lithuanian friends; on the other hand, parents are happier being able to communicate with each other and discuss various problems*".

At home parents try to speak as correct Lithuanian as possible. They pointed out: "*In our family and at home we speak only strictly Lithuanian*", "*at home we speak Lithuanian, watch films and have books in Lithuanian<...>*", "*We just all speak Lithuanian, therefore a child naturally speaks Lithuanian*". The use of Lithuanian is encouraged employing a variety of forms and methods: "*<...>I read fairy tales in Lithuania before falling asleep or I start a CD with recorded fairy tales, where intonation, stresses are more accurate than we speak in the family*", "*We want our children to communicate with other Lithuanian children as often as possible not to turn Lithuanian in to a language of adults only for them*", "*<...>I have bought CDs with Lithuanian fairy tales, songs and lullabies in Lithuania. In summer I let children stay with their grandparents in Lithuania*".

Following the opinion of the majority of parents in the research, it can be stated that the national identity is most frequently fostered in children's education institution while celebrating various festivals and respecting traditions and customs. The parents stated that: "*Festivals are celebrated together with the whole community: grandparents, parents and children. Children perform, folk songs are sung by grandparents and parents, we play games, every year masses are held in Lithuanian chapel*", "*<...>after masses we all gather in the school, contest of Easter egg rolling, parents sing folk songs<...>*". More than half of the respondents pointed out that they are satisfied with the content of children's national identity and environment in an educational institution: "*Everything is perfect there<...>*", "*Teachers get along with children very well*". However, other parents in the survey expressed concerns about too great influence of alien culture on their children: "*Though development of nationality in an educational institution is sufficient, at home the culture of the host country takes over*".

The research results disclosed that parents find it important for kindergarten teachers to speak correct Lithuanian with children and they want their children to learn about Lithuania as much as possible. They expressed satisfaction that: "*<...>Lithuanian fairy tales are read to their children*", "*Lithuanian songs are sung, and Lithuanian books are read in Lithuanian*"; "*<...>weekend lessons for Lithuanian children, where they are taught to read and write in Lithuanian*" are organised. Teachers and parents identified the following forms of nurturing love for the motherland: "*<...>when someone visits Lithuania, they always bring pictures*", "*<...>guests from Lithuania visit us*", "*Each Friday after work we gather together with parents and children in the yard of kindergarten and everybody is able to tell something about Lithuania or traditions, to sing songs*", "*When we get back to Lithuania, we always try to visit cultural places<...>*", "*I teach children to pray, when we go to church during festivals*".

The family members and relatives living in Lithuania help to maintain relations with motherland. The parents pointed out that children most frequently get knowledge "*from grandmother, who lives in Lithuania. They do it communicating via Skype*", "*<...>visiting grandparents and they learn Lithuanian songs or fairy tales*".

The research data disclosed that the level of children's identity is rather high but their intention to identify with the culture of the host country is also observed.

Pursuing to identify parents' attitude and actions related to development of their children's national identity, one more research was conducted in 2012. The questionnaire survey was filled in by 23 parents living in Norway, Germany and the United Kingdom.

Firstly, attempts were made to identify how parents take care of nurturance of their children's national culture. For example, see Fig. 1.

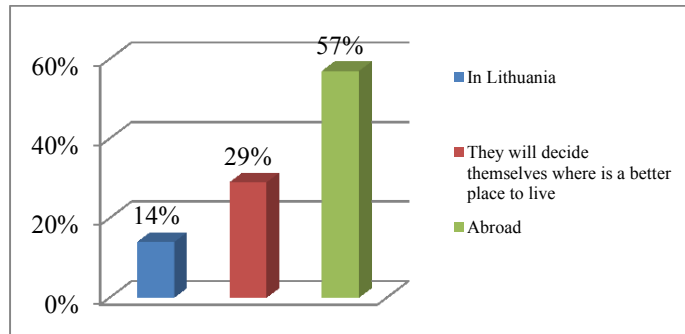


Fig. 1. Nurturance of national culture

On the basis of various scientific sources it can be stated that individuals living abroad should not forget that the main factor, which predetermines success of formation of national self-awareness and personality's (self-) development embraces values nurtured by parents. Only parents' awareness, determination and will are likely to play a crucial role in whether Lithuanian will be spoken at home, whether Lithuanian traditions will be preserved and Lithuanian books, journals and newspaper will be available at home, etc. The results of the conducted research show that more than half of the Lithuanian living in emigration make efforts to retain their national identity celebrating national festivals, slightly less than one fourth of the respondents do it preparing Lithuanian national holidays. However, only a very small proportion of the respondents indicated speaking Lithuanian at home as one of the ways to maintain the national identity, though it is the most universal tool of the national self-awareness education.

The need of identification emerges, when an individual confronts with in a multi-national environment. Historiographic sources show that activities of Lithuanian communities in emigration have been an important factor of the national identity preservation to all the generation of emigrants. The majority of communities have established a system of maintenance of national identity and they run Lithuanian educational institutions. Being aware of the fact that identification occurs through community socialising with people of the same nationality, the parents were asked if they are members of the Lithuanian community. It is interesting to point out that only half of the respondents pointed out that they are active members of local Lithuanian community.

Lithuanians, who live in a multicultural environment abroad, encounter a challenge of building up children's rich and substantive constructs about Lithuania. This problem is usually solved through communication with relatives living in Lithuania, stories and narrations about Lithuania, reading to a child in mother tongue, etc. Attempts were also made to identify the themes and content of stories told by parents to their children about Lithuania. The research data are presented in Figure 2.

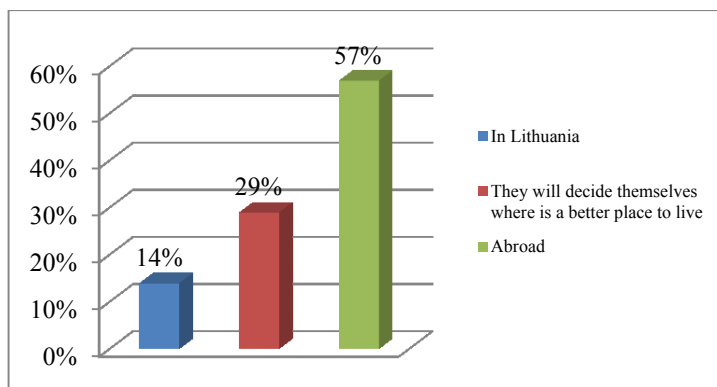


Fig. 2. Content of stories for children about Lithuania

Almost one fourth of parents do not tell anything about Lithuania to their children. They may think that in such a way their children will undergo the process of integration into alien socio-cultural environment smoother. According to the obtained data, slightly more than one fourth of the respondents are not satisfied with the situation in Lithuania and they tell their children about poor economic situation there. Only half of the respondents tell their children about Lithuania and are proud of their motherland, nature, history, etc.

Referring to the national self-awareness of emigrants, the following characteristics of the self-awareness presented in Figure 3 are considered.

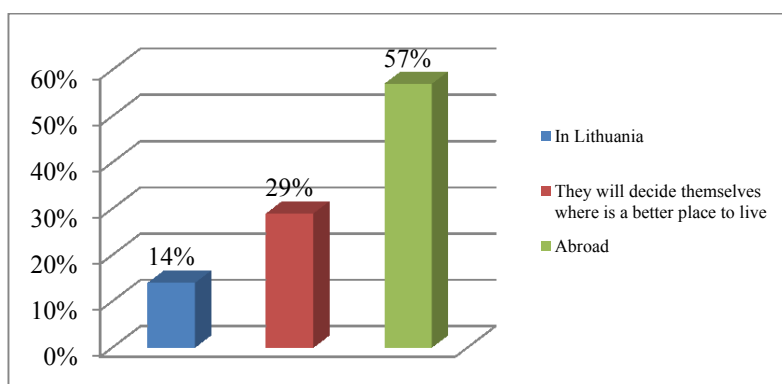


Fig. 3. Attitude of emigrants towards Lithuania and Lithuanian identity

The research data provided in Figure 3 show that emigrants are disappointed with Lithuania, their national self-awareness and self-perception is rather low: more than half of the respondents are not proud of being Lithuanians, they are ashamed of their “roots“. A positive attitude towards Lithuania and Lithuanian identity was revealed in the answers of less than half of the respondents. In such cases a family has to make a decision which path to choose: to protect own heritage, to nurture national dignity, etc. or to choose denationalisation.

The practice shows that life in emigration is frequently seen as a challenge to their patriotism, nurturance of the sense of national self-respect. The respondents were asked about Lithuanian national symbols at home. Figure 4 contains data, which reflects an obvious lack of national dignity. Slightly more than half of the respondents (parents) pointed out that they have Lithuanian national symbols at home: flag, books about Lithuania, T-shirts, fridge magnets, amber beads. Namely ignoring of national symbols enhances the national disability.

Home and native place serve as an essential support of individual's identity. Its loss undermines the essence of human identity. The opinion of parents about future of their children, on the one hand, demonstrates the strength of

the national identity and, on the other hand, reveals general cultural orientations. The data of the survey are shown in Figure 4.

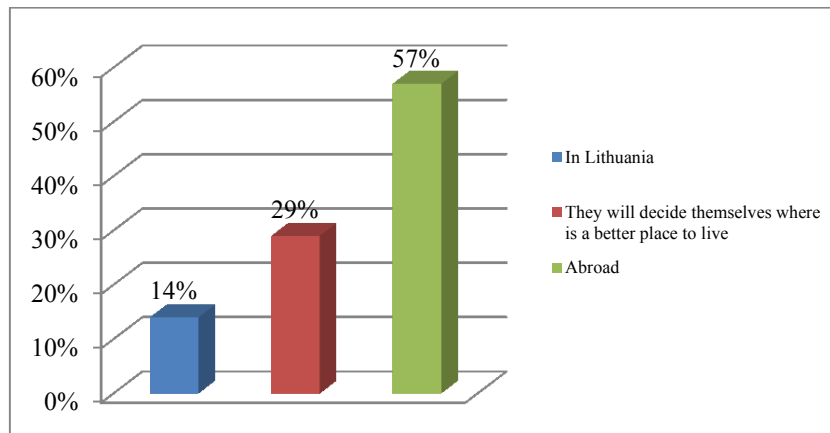


Fig. 4. Parents' opinion about future children's living place

The analysis of parents' opinions about future plans of their children and choice of living place showed that as many as 57 % of children will continue living abroad. According to the opinion of 29 % of the parents, their children will decide themselves where they want to live and only 14 % of the respondents pointed out that their children will live in Lithuania.

4. Conclusions

The resistance of national identity depends on individuals' national self-awareness and on personal maturity of national self-awareness. Firstly, children start perceiving their own identity in the native environment, identifying it with family through adoption of values nurtured in their family. In emigration this happens through the ethnic language, historical experience, national culture and fostering of traditions. Thus, the prerequisites for building up of children's national self-awareness, which constructs his or her national identity, are established.

The results of the research carried out in 2010 revealed that the level of children's identity is rather high but their intention to identify with the culture of the host country is observed. The children in the survey perceive themselves as Lithuanians since they possess specific features, which are different from other ethnic groups living in emigration. The conversation with children showed that their love for Lithuania is mainly enhanced celebrating national festivals, talking about Lithuania and frequently visiting parents' native country. However, the results of the research results revealed that half of the informants do not have plans to return to Lithuania, though their attitudes towards Lithuania are positive.

Living in emigration it is necessary to highlight priority values of a member of the Lithuanian nation and to build up a system of national values. According to the questionnaire survey of parents living in emigration, which was carried out in 2010, this principle is followed in a principled way. This is confirmed by parents' wish to return to Lithuania, their informed choice of Lithuanian cultural school, nurturance of the Lithuanian language and traditions and maintenance of close links with Lithuania.

The results of the research carried out in 2012 disclosed a more negative attitude of the respondents towards nurturance of the national identity and a close connection of them and their children with Lithuania. They tend to adopt features of the new socio-cultural environment. More than half of the respondents link the future of their children with living abroad. Such position of parents living in emigration is more related to their endeavour to survive, i.e., with physical existence rather than with maintenance and nurturance of the national identity.

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